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ABSTRACT

Skills For Life, since 2001 the United Kingdom's national adult basic skills strategy, aims to improve literacy, numeracy, or English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) skills among people over the age of 16. Basic skills programs may be full- or part-time and are delivered in colleges, community venues, neighborhood learning centers, adult education centers, or the workplace. Local councils are responsible for the planning, funding, and delivery of services. Skills For Life targets groups in society that are prone to social exclusion and for whom low basic skills are a barrier to employment. The strategy has targets of improving the literacy and numeracy skills of 750,000 adults by 2004 and 1.5 million by 2007. Skills For Life has published national standards for literacy and numeracy and curriculum documents for literacy, numeracy, and ESOL. A national qualifications and assessment framework for literacy, numeracy and ESOL has been established as well as national tests. Research has begun in basic skills teaching and learning and effective approaches to teaching workplace skills. A national qualifications framework for teacher training and professional development is being developed. The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education's (NIACE) role is to advocate on behalf of adults who are under-represented in all forms of adult learning. (Contains a list of NIACE's projects, contacts, and a list of resources and websites.) (SLR)

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# Basic skills

niace
promoting adult learning

## What are basic skills?

"The ability to read write and speak English and to use mathematics at a level necessary to function at work and in society in general."

Definition from the Basic Skills Agency

This is the forty-fourth in a series of briefing sheets which aim to provide an introduction to a variety of lifelong learning issues

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*Skills for Life*, the national adult basic skills strategy, aims to improve literacy, numeracy or ESOL skills among people over the age of 16 at all levels up to and including Level 2, through discrete taught programmes, through additional learning support for learners on other programmes, or as an integral part of another informal, vocational or academic course. Basic skills programmes can be full or part-time, delivered using self-study or ICT. They can be delivered in colleges, community venues, neighbourhood learning centres, adult education centres or the workplace. Basic Skills is more accurately referred to as literacy, language and numeracy. Local Learning and Skills Councils (LLSCs) are responsible for the planning, funding and delivery of this provision within their areas.

## Context

The literacy, language and numeracy skills of adults are now the subject of greater government attention, media focus and funding than ever before. *Skills for Life* was launched in spring 2001. This is the second time national government has campaigned in this area. The first was in the early 1970s when the Adult Literacy Resource Agency (ALRA) was established as an agency of NIACE. ALRA eventually became ALU and ALBSU and is now known as the Basic Skills Agency (BSA).

In 1999 *A Fresh Start*, the report from Sir Claus Moser's working group on adult basic skills, estimated that seven million people, or 1 in 5 adults in England, have poor literacy or numeracy skills, including about half a million or more who struggle with English because it is not their first language. People with poor literacy, numeracy or language skills tend to be on lower incomes or unemployed and are likely to be more prone to ill health and social exclusion. It has been estimated that the cost to industry of poor basic skills among the workforce is £10bn annually. People with poor literacy and numeracy skills earn up to 11% less on average than people who are literate



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(have sufficient literacy skills). *Skills for Life* targets a series of groups in society prone to social exclusion for whom low basic skills is a barrier to employment and civic participation. Specifically they are: unemployed people and benefit claimants; prisoners and those supervised in the community; public sector employees; low-skilled people in employment; and other groups at risk of exclusion. About half of those with poor basic skills are in work, predominantly in low-skilled or short-term employment. Of the 7 million adults with under-developed literacy, language and numeracy, about 1 million are under 25 years old and 2 million are over 55. The government is setting an example by leading the way in policies to identify and address any literacy, language and numeracy development among public sector employees.

The strategy, led by the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit (ABSSU) at the Department for Education and Skills, is supported by £1.5 billion to improve basic skills achievement until 2007. It has set targets of improving the literacy and numeracy skills of 750,000 adults by 2004 and 1.5 million by 2007. This is measured by the number of individuals passing a recognised qualification. These targets will require both widening participation to new and different learners and improving the effectiveness of learning programmes. For 1.5 million adults to achieve a qualification at least 4 million must participate by 2007. The national Learning and Skills Council is a primary player in ensuring the targets are met within its 47 local councils.

## The National Strategy since 2001

Since 2001, *Skills for Life* has published national standards for literacy and numeracy, curriculum documents for literacy, numeracy and ESOL at three Entry levels, Level 1 and Level 2, and a draft Pre-Entry curriculum framework. There have been national staff development programmes in the use of these documents. Regional pathfinder partnerships have been piloting a range of new approaches to improving basic skills, and diagnostic assessment and learning materials have been produced. In 2002, the National Research and Development Centre for Literacy and Numeracy was launched. This is a consortium led by the Institute of Education, University of London, of which NIACE is a member. It is conducting research into effective approaches to widening participation in basic skills activities, as well as in teaching and learning.

A new national qualifications and assessment framework for literacy, numeracy and ESOL has been established. There are national tests at levels 1 and 2, and new portfolio-based qualifications at the three Entry levels. It is planned that the tests will be available to learners on a weekly basis, and online. Examples of the tests for practice are available (see Resources section).

ABSSU recently commissioned action research into basic skills teaching and learning embedded in other programmes of learning and training, and on effective approaches to workplace basic skills. In 2002, the FE National Training Organisation, FENTO, published new specialist standards for professional literacy, numeracy and ESOL teachers, classroom assistants, and volunteer teachers. A national qualifications framework for teacher training and professional development is being developed.

## NIACE's Role

NIACE advocates on behalf of all adults who are under-represented in all forms of adult learning. Many of these are people whose literacy, language and numeracy abilities are not at the levels demanded by living and working in the 21st Century. NIACE wants to advocate that development of basic skills empowers people to participate and contribute to living and working. Basic skills help people to make sense of the world as well as the word. NIACE actively works at national and regional levels to identify inequalities, campaign for change and promote and celebrate opportunities. It works with politicians, policy makers and providers. NIACE is a research and development organisation seeking to identify evidence about the complexities of adult learning and helping to develop capacity amongst all sectors of provision. It is active in these fields in relation to literacy, language and numeracy.

## NIACE's overall strategic priorities

NIACE has an important role in literacy, language and numeracy development in the UK to press for the voice of the learner to be heard.

Through national development funds we can also seize the opportunity to encourage new providers so that 'more and different' learners are attracted to more and different provision. Whilst it's important we keep an eye on quality, it's essential we open up the provision offer so that potential learners have lots of options to choose from. In order to include more community based work, we must work with the voluntary and community sector (VCS) to build capacity. NIACE is particularly interested in:

- embedded basic skills
- numeracy
- ESOL
- literacy, language and numeracy for people with disabilities and learning difficulties
- writing (not just reading)
- valuing the voices of learners
- capacity-building especially in the VCS
- widening participation

## NIACE's Basic Skills Strategy

The NIACE Basic Skills Strategy Paper can be downloaded from the NIACE website www.niace.org.uk/Research/BasicSkills/Basic%20Skills%20Strategy.pdf

## NIACE's recent and ongoing Project work

**Evaluation of national programmes**
**Step in to Learning Training**
The evaluation of the Basic Skills, Step in to Learning training, started in March 2002 and will continue until March 2004. This involves working with staff in Neighbourhood nurseries to identify what works, or not, in raising awareness amongst staff as well as reaching parents and carers.

**Family learning**
Learning and Skills Council funded family learning programmes which have been evaluated recently by NIACE. This included family literacy, language and numeracy as well as wider family learning. Part of the work identified interesting and effective practice as well as critical success factors. The report is available on the website www.niace.org.uk/Research/Family

**Dyslexic learners**
NIACE with the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) is carrying out research into the teaching and learning approaches used with dyslexic learners in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL provision. This research project, funded by ABSSU, is developing over a year, starting in April 2003.

**National Health Service University (NHSU)**
The National Health Service University (NHSU) will be launched in Autumn 2003. It will be the largest corporate university in the world and will provide educational opportunities for all those working in and for the NHS, some 1.2 million people. Skills for Life and Health is a key NHSU portfolio which NIACE coordinates; basic skills will be an important aspect of this huge initiative (see NIACE Briefing Sheet No 43 and website www.nhsu.nhs.uk. (Key contact at NIACE is Peter Lavender.)

**Developing Embedded Basic Skills Project**
The Embedded Basic Skills action research project funded by ABSSU and the LSC ran from July 2002 to March 2003. The project had two main aims: the first was to determine the key success factors which enable quality literacy, language and numeracy learning to take place embedded in other courses. The second was to identify the delivery costs, the learning infrastructure, staff training and professional development needed to deliver effective models of embedded basic skills. More information can be found on the NIACE website www.niace.org.uk

**Continuing Professional Development**
This area of work includes several programmes. BASIL(Basic Skills for Inclusive Learning) is the National Training Project for Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL Teachers and Trainers working with Adults with Learning Difficulties or Disabilities. It is delivered by a consortium for the LSC jointly led by NIACE and LSDA. This work supports teachers and trainers using the adult pre-entry curriculum framework and the Access for All guidance on making the literacy and numeracy core curricula accessible to all learners. In addition, ESOL curriculum training was organised by NIACE during 2001 and 2002 for ESOL tutors teaching more than six hours per week. This delivery consortium was led by the London Language and Literacy Unit. Training for staff in UK online centres is also planned.

This will raise their awareness about basic skills development for adults. More information can be found on the NIACE website www.niace.org.uk

## NIACE Contacts

Development Officers: (Basic Skills) **Chris Taylor, Silvanna Harvey, Joyce Black, Jan Eldred,** (Family Learning) **Jeanne Haggart,** (Health, Disability & Equality) **Jeannie Sutcliffe, Yola Jacobson, Christine Nightingale, Kathryn James.**
Basic Skills Administrator: **Bhupinder Nijjar,** email bhupinder.nijjar@niace.org.uk
Tel: 0116 2044200
Website: www.niace.org.uk

## Other Useful Contacts

**Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit**
Department for Education and Skills
Caxton House
6-12 Tothill Street
London SW1H 9NA
Tel: 08700 012345
Unit: 020 7273 1223
Website: www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus

There are 9 regional co-ordinators:
Yorkshire & Humber: Philippa Lester, Tel: 07789 032846
W. Midlands: Sue Henderson, Tel: 07879 432226
E. Midlands: Lisa Capper, Tel: 07879 432224
Eastern: Andrea Mearing: Tel: 07879 432219
North East: Henry Kelly, Tel: 07879 432223
North West: Andrew Nelson, Tel: 0161 9524428
South East: John Tempest, Tel: 07879 432225
South West: Janet Anderson, Tel: 07879 432220
London: Rozi Premji, Tel: 07879 432221

**Basic Skills Agency**
Commonwealth House
1-19 New Oxford Street
London WC1A 1NU
Tel: 0207 4054017
Website: www.basic-skills.co.uk

**Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO)**
4th Floor, Farringdon Street
London EC4A 4HJ
Tel: 020 7332 9500
Website: www.fento.co.uk

**Learning and Skills Council**
Head Office, Cheylesmore House
Quinton Road
Coventry CV1 2WT
Tel: 0870 9006800
Website: www.lsc.gov.uk
Responsible for funding post 16 education and training in England. This is the national office address. There are 47 local councils throughout the country. The regional office addresses can be found on the LSC website.

**London Language and Literacy Unit**
South Bank University
103 Borough Road
London SE1 0AA
Tel: 020 7815 6290
Website: www.sbu.ac.uk/caxton/lllu/

**National Association for Teaching English and other Community Languages to Adults (NATECLA )**
National Centre
South Birmingham College
99-103 Clifton Road
Balsall Heath
Birmingham B12 8SR
Tel: 0121 6888121
Website: www.natecla.org.uk

**National Literacy Trust**
Swire House
59 Buckingham Gate
London SW1E 6AJ
Tel: 020 7808 2435
Website: www.literacytrust.org.uk

**National Open College Network**
University of Derby
Kedleston Road
Derby DE22 1GB
Tel. 01332 591071
Website: www.nocn.ac.uk

**National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC)**
Institute of Education
University of London
20 Bedford Way
London WC1H 0AL
Tel: 020 7612 6797
Website:
http://ioewebserver.ioe.ac.uk/ioe/cms/get.asp?cid=4058

**Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)**
83 Piccadilly
London W1J 8QA
Tel: 020 7509 5555
Website: www.qca.org.uk
QCA have approved literacy and numeracy qualifications and they are available now. Information can be found on their website

**RAPAL**
Research and Practice in Adult Literacy Group
C/o Centre for the Study of Education and Training
Lancaster University
Lancaster LA1 4YL
Tel: 01524 592679
Website: www.literacy.lancs.ac.uk/rapal

**Workplace Basic Skills Network**
CSET
Cartmel College
Lancaster University
Lancaster LA1 4YL
Tel: 01524 593405
Website: www.lancs.ac.uk/wbsnet

## NIACE Basic Skills Publications

**Access for all : guidance on making the adult literacy and numeracy core curricula accessible**. NIACE and LSDA, 2002. ISBN 185338 695 2. Available from the Basic Skills Agency

**Adult pre-entry literacy and numeracy curriculum framework**. NIACE, LSDA and BSA, 2002. ISBN 1853387398. Available from the Basic Skills Agency

**Adults count too: mathematics for empowerment**. Roseanne Benn. NIACE, 1997. ISBN 1 86201 007 2 £14.95

**Adults learning**. Basic skills themed issue. Vol. 12, Number 10. June 2001. ISSN 0955 2308

**Basic skills for adults with learning difficulties or disabilities. A resource pack to support staff development**. NIACE and Basil Consortium for the DfES. March 2003. ISBN 1 84185 574 X. Available through DfES Publications.

**Breaking down barriers: certificate in workplace language, literacy and numeracy training**. Fiona Frank, Chris Holland and Jaine Chisholm Caunt (editors). NIACE, 2002. ISBN 1 86201 130 3 £15.95

**Dreaming, stealing, dancing, showing off** (delivering basic skills in local communities). Peter Lavender and Chris Taylor. Adults Learning. Vol 13, Number 5, pp12-15. January 2002. ISSN 0955 2308

**The give and take of writing: scribes, literacy and everyday life**. Jane Mace. NIACE, 2002 ISBN 1 86201 124 9 £15.95

**Literacy and the new work order: an international literature review**. Chris Holland with Fiona Frank and Tony Cooke. NIACE, 1998. ISBN 1 86201 018 8 £10.00

**NIACE Basic Skills Strategy**. Chris Taylor. NIACE, 2001
www.niace.org.uk/Research/BasicSkills/documents.htm

**Opening up a new world : a good practice guide for delivering basic skills and ESOL in the local community**. Bhupinder Nijjar, Helen Murphy and Chris Taylor. NIACE, 2002. ISBN 1 86201 133 8.
£6.95

**Powerful literacies**. Jim Crowther, Mary Hamilton and Lyn Tett (editors). NIACE, 2001. ISBN 1 86201 094 3 £15.95

Many other NIACE reports on Basic Skills work are available from the NIACE website: www.niace.org.uk/Research/BasicSkills/documents.htm

## Other Useful Resources and Websites

**Basic Skills Bulletin**
Independent monthly magazine on Basic Skills issues. Simon Boyd publishing Ltd, 34 Kimberley Rd, Cambridge CB4 1HH. Tel: 01223 513551. Email: sboydpublishing@aol.com

**Basic Skills National Strategy Documents**

- Skills for Life
- Improving literacy and numeracy: a fresh start (the Moser Report)
- National Standards for Adult Literacy and Numeracy
- Employer Toolkit
- Delivering Skills for Life
- Access for All
- Pathfinders: lessons for success
- Freedom to Learn
- Breaking the language barriers
- Quarterly Strategy Update newsletter

Can be ordered free or downloaded from:
www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus

**Curriculum and standards**

A core curriculum has been produced for ESOL, literacy and numeracy based on national standards.

- Adult Literacy Core Curriculum including spoken communication
- Adult Numeracy Core Curriculum
- Adult ESOL Core Curriculum
- Adult Pre-Entry Curriculum Framework

Can be ordered or downloaded free from:
www.basic-skills.co.uk/resources/default.asp

**Literacy and numeracy sample test papers**

Can be downloaded from the QCA website:
www.qca.org.uk/nq/bs/?fp_clk

**Skills Wise**

New interactive adult literacy and numeracy resource from the BBC Skillswise website:
www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise
There is a free booklet available to accompany the site available from: Skillswise, PO Box 7000, Manchester, M60 3HE

## Useful International Websites

**Adult Education Teacher's Annotated Webliography**
Resources on adult learning and literacy
Website: http://alri.org/pubs/webliography.html

**Educational Resources Information Center (US)**
Website: www.eric.ed.gov

**Languages Australia – the National Languages & Literacy Institute of Australia**
Website: http://languageaustralia.com.au

**National Adult Literacy Database (Canadian)**
Website: http://www.nald.ca

**National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (US)**
Website: http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~ncsall

**National Institute for Literacy (US)**
Website: http://novel.nifl.gov

NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training. It aims to do this for those who do not have easy access because of barriers of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties or disabilities, or insufficient resources.
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